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ABSTRACT

Although some teachers doubt that sports literature should be taught in the college English class, the study of sports literature is enjoyable for studeents to read, think, and write. In a course entitled "The Rhetoric of Sport: Society, Media, Literature," students study the role of sport in society through reading articles and books that show the interrelationships between sports and such social issues as race, politics, hero worship, and violence. They learn about sport in the media through readings that show how language is used in sports writing, how the rhetoric of sports journalism shapes attitudes toward sport, and how the language of sport has been assimilated by government and business. Finally, students learn about sport in literature through reading works that deal tangentially with sport, such as "The Great Gatsby," as well as those unique to the sports scene, such as Roger Kahn's "The Boys of Summer." A list of course readings is appended. (Information on the organization of a freshman composition course taught through the use of sports literature is presented in a separate document.) (GW)

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The Rhetoric of Sport: A Course For All Seasons[1]

During the past six years as a teaching assistant, visiting instructor, and assistant professor of English, I've assumed various instructional hats. I have taught courses ranging from technical writing to Restoration Drama. The course objectives have differed, but the teaching problems have remained the same--motivating students to learn; teaching students to read, think, and write; establishing student-student and student-teacher interaction. A course in the rhetoric of sport has been particularly effective in solving these basic teaching problems and also satisfying a variety of instructional objectives.

My original intention for this article was to simply describe my experiences in teaching sports literature, "Jock Lit" as it is frequently called, and give specific examples of its use in the college English class. But before I do this, I sense a need to present a brief rationale for using this body of literature. Over the past months, I have discovered that not everyone shares my view of the importance of sports literature in the English curriculum. To prevent later confusion, I should first define exactly what I mean by literature. I use the term in its broadest sense, referring to traditional fiction by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Malamud, and Updike; recent nonfiction by Kahn, Bradley, Novak, and Michener; and newspaper articles and essays appearing in magazines and journals such as Esquire, Sports Illustrated, Psychology Today, and Chicago Review.

Two recent comments indicate the reasons for my defensiveness about using this material. Melvin Maddocks, in reviewing for Time James A. Michener's Sports in America and Michael Novak's The Joy of Sports, had this to say about nonfiction Jock Lit : "Taken as innocent ego trips by authors who

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want to retain title to a Huck Finn boyhood without forfeiting their college degrees, the genre may be enjoyed by nostalgic and overeducated readers on their own night off. Furthermore, the premise behind these books is admirable: Why should the jock and the egghead be cultural schizophrenics?"[2] Soon after reading this, I received a letter from the editor of College Composition and Communication, who in the process of rejecting my article on "Sport in the Composition Class" made the following observation: "The disadvantage of sports literature, it seems to me, is that one runs the risk of boring half the students in the class. It is a commonplace--maybe the result of our tendency to deal in stereotypes--that women are not as vitally interested in sports as men are. I can imagine some girl in your class saying, 'My God, I'm stuck all semester with reading and writing about a lot of macho jocks!'" Not completely defeated by these remarks, I hope to convince some of you that this body of literature can be taken out from under the bed and placed in the English classroom where it will be of value and interest to many students, even men and women who profess little interest in sport. Despite the snickers that may eminate from some members of the academic community, this body of literature does have an integrity in its form and content.

Obviously, my use of this genre is not establishing a precedent. Other categories of "Pop Literature" have successfully been introduced into the English curriculum, most notably detective fiction and science fiction. Noel Perrin in The Chronicle of Higher Education lists several institutions presenting a course in science fiction, and he goes on to describe his own course at Dartmouth.[3] In the field of sports literature Wilmington College, the University of Maryland, and Purdue University, to name a few, have established courses. In fact, in the April 1977 issue of College English, Louis Kampf,

Professor of Humanities at M.I.T., discusses his course on mass spectator sports.[4] As a further indication of the emergence of sports literature as a popular offering in English departments, both Harcourt Brace and David McKay Publishers have marketed anthologies designed for use in college literature and composition classes.[5]

People who teach popular literature genres usually agree that the courses attract students who normally avoid literature; serve as avenues to other literature; and have high enrollments, perhaps because students have "fun." In terms of my own course, such observations prove accurate, although the reference to having fun disturbs me. Should students have fun in a literature class? My graduate school training in literature would lead me to say no. Students should be intellectually stimulated, enlightened, and even entertained; but they shouldn't have fun. Of course, the practical side of me, developed after six years of teaching composition and literature to a frequently hostile audience, says students can and should have fun in an English class, especially one where the materials are readily accessible for a majority of students and contain recognizable connections to human concerns and activities. Sports literature fits this description and also fulfills several other qualities of standard literature: equipment for living, a source of direct and oblique comments about contemporary life, a statement of universal ideas about man, a model of effective writing techniques, and entertainment. One other important characteristic—this body of literature illustrates that "serious writing can come out of subject matter that we are often too quick to judge as too ephemeral for significant implications."[6]

In this course where the students can have fun, they analyze play and its corruption in organized sport, plus study the sociology, politics, and

economics of sport. Such a basic knowledge of sport is important, but I also ask the students to explore the language of sports literature and the depiction of unique and universal experiences, in the process accepting this literature as a way for them to understand language; attain self-awareness; and recognize their own drives for recognition, self-fulfillment, and human contact. Thus, the course becomes not just a study of society but an examination of individuals involved with sport as spectators and participants. Do these people have unique problems, goals, and views of life, or do they share with everyone certain psychological and spiritual similarities? Most important, students in this class perceive why the game metaphor is so appropriate for explaining life.

Admittedly, these are abstract and lofty claims. Let me turn to a discussion of how these goals are accomplished in the course entitled "The Rhetoric of Sport: Society, Media, Literature." For many English teachers, an exact duplication of this course may prove impossible or undesirable. But certain reading selections and approaches to this material might prove valuable in existing courses, for example introductory courses in literature, media, or composition. Although I will refer to a few articles or books to illustrate major points, my selections are merely examples of numerous suitable pieces of literature. My intention is not to emphasize particular readings but to indicate general themes and teaching methodology important in the study of sports literature.

SPORT IN SOCIETY

> Sport tells anyone who watches intelligently about the the times in which we live: about managed news and corporate politics, about race and terror and what the process of aging does to strong men. If this sounds grim, there is courage and high humor too.[7]
>
> —Roger Kahn

No one can deny the impact sport has had on American culture--at all ages and social levels. Kids become involved in competitive sports at the age of six; mothers drive the children to an endless number of sports activities; fathers spend Monday evenings in front of the television watching professional football or baseball; and grandparents retire to Arizona to play golf year-round. The rich congregate at exclusive tennis centers or country clubs; the poor frequent the neighborhood playgrounds and basketball courts. While teachers attempt to improve Johnny's reading with sport magazines, Johnny signs a million-dollar professional contract. Athletes (Ghent, Bouton, Brosnan, Bradley) become authors; famous authors (Michener, Mailer, Roth, Updike) write about sport. Finally, that vast number of "silent Americans" become quite vocal as they gather in front of the television to watch every sport from arm wrestling to demolition derby.

The reasons for this preoccupation with sport are myriad. Bereft of its traditional heroes--soldiers, statesmen, and industrialists—America turns its "lonely eyes" to athletes. People of all ages pursuing personal fulfillment in an impersonal society turn to sport to achieve self-satisfaction and recognition. The fame and fortune of professional athletes intrigue young people considering a career. Individuals seeking a group affiliation become fans of a professional team. As a result of this mass engrossment, sport emerges as a dominant social institution, complete with activities, hierarchy, rules of conduct, and standards.

The reading selections in this unit focus on the interrelations between sport, as a cultural and human event, and particular social issues such as race, politics, hero worship, and violence. One group of articles deals with reasons for sports participation. Keith Mano's subjects in "It's Workmen's

Compensation" (Sports Illustrated, 5 Nov. 1973) are seeking personal satisfaction. As amateur softball players, they play an endless number of games in relative obscurity. Some are young men with dreams of becoming professional athletes; most, however, are aging men, clinging to the excitement, spirit, and hope of their youth by playing a kid's game. Yet despite the demands this sport makes on the players and their families, they continue to participate because of a "love" for the game.

Other articles analyze the ways in which sport reflects and affects society. In "Football Red and Baseball Green " (Chicago Review, Jan.-Feb. 1971), Murray Ross notes that sport contains a fundamental myth that mirrors the character and fantasies of society. Thus, baseball is a pastoral sport, recreating a world of the past--simplicity, tranquility, and contentment. Football, on the other hand, is a modern, heroic game with intense, violent action and an emphasis on game technology and specialized playing units. But if baseball is pastoral and football technological, then, according to Pete Axthelm in The City Game, basketball belongs to the urban environment. The game's one-on-one patterns, fast movement, and intense action fit perfectly within the confined spaces of a city playground and the hectic urban life style. For kids and adults, playing basketball provides a way of "defining identity and manhood in an urban society that breeds invisibility." Some of the players are able to leave this environment, using their talents to get a college scholarship and a professional contract; others, despite their reputations on the neighborhood court, are unable to escape the ghetto disease--unemployment, drugs, and prison.

Among the most prominent social trends making a distinct impression

on sport are the increase in violence and the emergence of women and minorities as influential members of the social structure. Ron Fimrite in "Take Me Out To The Brawl Game" (Sports Illustrated, 17 June 1974) analyzes the upsurge in spectator violence at sports events and indicates this is merely an outgrowth of America's violent life style. In "Now Georgy-Porgy Runs Away" (Sports Illustrated, 22 April 1974), Frank Deford uses the controversy surrounding girls' attempts to play little league baseball to discuss the plight of female athletes in their entrance into the traditional male-oriented sports world. Continuing this sociological critique, Bill Russell in "Success Is A Journey" (Sports Illustrated, 8 June 1970) uses his own basketball career to explode many of the myths of sport and to analyze the game from the perspective of the Black athlete: "Sport reflects American Life....The fans bring their prejudices right along with them."

Finally, in "King of the Goons: Evil Knievel" (Rolling Stone, 7 Nov. 1974), Joe Eszterhas answers the question: "Where have all our heroes gone?" According to the author, they have bought Harley Davidsons and are now jumping cars, busses, trucks, and even the Snake Canyon. They are engaged in the newest sport "Life Against Money." The reporter's new-journalistic coverage of Knievel's unsuccessful jump of Snake Canyon becomes an unflattering portrait of the new sports hero, the news media, and a society desperately searching for a hero.

SPORT IN THE MEDIA

> The new Nixon team is in the locker room right now, getting ready for the second half. What, Wall Street is wondering, will be the new game plan? In a powerful scoring drive late in the first half, the veteran coach of the GOP Elephants got the economic ball rolling well . . . But it's a tricky business trying to read Mr. Nixon's play book in advance.
>
> --New York Times Financial Section, 13 Dec. 1972

Perhaps, a more appropriate title for this unit would be the study of sports language, for these readings are used to examine three issues: 1) how people use language in appropriate or ineffective ways to talk and write about sport; 2) how the rhetoric of sports journalism shapes attitudes toward sport; and 3) how the language of sport has found its way as metaphor into almost every aspect of American life. The latter is perfectly illustrated in the N.Y. Times' description of Nixon's re-election. As Francine Hardaway notes in a recent article, the language of athletic competition has been assimilated by government and business.[8] The competitive nature of business is compatible with "team players," "a winning spirit," "big winners and losers," companies and executives "bouncing back" or "on the ropes," and employees with "two strikes against them." Frequently, the energetic employee who "plays ball" has the opportunity to "take the ball and run with it." As a result of this language study, students begin to understand the meaning of a metaphor and its purpose. They also learn how phrases become overused and turn into cliches, thus serving as handy escapes from meaningful thought or statement.

From an examination of sports language students learn other uses and abuses of language, specifically diction problems discussed in most composition handbooks and encountered in student writing. Edwin Newman in "Regulated to the Bench, Sportswise" (Sports Illustrated, 27 Sept. 1976) notes some of these problems: redundancy--a team was driving for "its sixth consecutive touchdown in a row" or the team "has won all eight of its games without a loss"; faulty logic--"a young man not of any specific speed or any specific size who makes a living by knowing how to run the patterns"; pretentious language--one team was accused, probably by Howard Cosell, of "perpetrating a

major upset after its ball carrier ran unmolestedly down the field for a touchdown"; misuse of words--a player holding a "detente" with the officials. These examples, along with the abundance of sports jargon, coinage of new words, clichés, and awkward metaphors (the well-oiled caveman machine snatched victory from the jaws of defeat) provide familiar examples of errors in diction which students commit but don't take the time to understand.

The most important activity in this unit is the study of writing styles, and sports writing is notorious for the poor quality of its scoreboard reporting and rococo description. Examples of this overwriting are found in the columns of Grantland Rice who made a football game into a catastrophic event:

> Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horseman rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army football team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds yesterday afternoon as 55,000 spectators peered down on the bewildering panorama spread on the green plain below.
>
> --N.Y. Herald Tribune, 19 Oct. 1924

A casual survey of today's sports pages reveals that many of "Granny's" pupils are using the same sunshine philosophy, sports jargon, and purple prose to turn out one more story.

Possibly the most difficult task in this unit is to convince students that skilled writing can appear in some of the most unexpected places--even articles and books about sport. In fact, one sportswriter Wells Twombly has stated that "today's sport pages have more style and more art than any other part of the paper."[9] In a New York Times' book review (3 July 1977), Donald Hall, a poet, compliments Roger Kahn's "sweet ear for the cadence of

baseball talk" (A Season in the Sun) while noting Roger Angel's "reasoning, rendering, responding to the game in prose as graceful as a pitcher's motion" (Five Seasons). From writers such as Mailer, Plimpton, Wolfe, and Jordan (frequently labelled "New Journalists"), students study the blend of critical attitude, personal involvement, lively/imaginative style, and narrative/descriptive techniques commonly found in fiction, all combined to create an absorbing account of sport and life. As a representative sample, I present the conclusion to Pat Jordan's Sports Illustrated article "Designing Woman" (14 Aug. 1975) about Mary Jo Pepler, a professional volleyball player:

> In the kitchen, three generations of women go about their Saturday morning. The grandmother, in her late 50s, begins to clean off the table. She whispers to her daughter, "So pretty! Is she married?" The wife, in her 30s, shakes her head no. She is measuring out medicine onto a plastic spoon and trying to force it down the throat of her 4-year-old son. The third generation, an eldest daughter of 12, is pacing around the kitchen waiting anxiously for Mary Jo to finish with the weights so she can talk to her. She, too, is an athlete, strong willed, and, of all the children, had most anticipated Mary Jo's arrival. She is 5' 7" and in her town she will be the first girl to make the major league division of the Little League. She fidgets and waits.
>
> Finally, she can restrain herself no longer. She peeks around the refrigerator into the dining room. Mary Jo is lying on the floor doing sit-ups with a weight grasped behind her head. Sweating, she struggles upward, simultaneously exhaling and blowing wisps of hair off her forehead. The daughter stares in fascination. The grandmother continues washing the dishes. The mother tightens the cap on the medicine bottle. Mary Jo struggles upward for another sit-up. The daughter continues to stare at her, is transfixed, hypnotized by the sudden unfolding of such infinite possibilities. ###
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The major goal of this unit is to take advantage of student reading habits and increase awareness of language. Thus, the section of the newspaper which is possibly the most widely read (the sports section) and a magazine (Sports Illustrated) with a 2,500,000 circulation become more than

statistical chronicles of sport but also models of effective or ineffective prose and valuable resources for language study.

SPORT IN LITERATURE

> The literature of sport is a vast uncharted territory, yet it is one in which we all live; it is part of a society pervaded by the awareness, the values, and the spirit of sports. That our literature accurately reflects such involvement is a matter largely ignored by literary critics but largely taken for granted by writers and readers. For example, the most powerful passages in Hemingway are concerned with blood sports, and Fitzgerald describes an entire atmosphere and the perception of an American in Paris in the two-word sentence: "Football weather." There is really no exit from our ubiquitous stadiums.
>
> --The Sporting Spirit
> Robert J. Higgs
> Neil D. Isaacs

The list of authors for this unit indicates that sport has provided the substance for numerous critically acclaimed works of literature, but why? As a sportswriter, Ring Lardner became involved with sports; the young Fitzgerald dreamed of becoming an athletic hero; and Hemingway was involved with sport, as a participant and spectator, for most of his life. Malamud perceived sport, particularly baseball, as a basis for an American mythology, and Frost once commented that "athletics are close to the soul of culture." If American life is indeed a game, what is a better way to promote an understanding of its rules and players than by using sport as a subject of literature? Within the sports setting, people face unique situations, stresses, and human interaction. But their reactions are universal, and the sports situation with its familiarity to the reader promotes an understanding of human experience.

Found in this body of literature are both traditional themes and others unique to the sports scene. Lardner's "Champion," written during the "golden

age of sport" when athletes were viewed as gods, is an unflattering portrait of the sports hero and a hero-worshipping public. Instead of being the all-American athlete, Midge Kelley is a "son of a bitch" who lies, cheats, and kicks his crippled brother. Hemingway's use of sport focuses on ritual, aesthetics, the community of sports afficionados, and the skill and code of sportsmanship exhibited by the participants--Nick Adams in "Big Two-Hearted River" and Pedro Romero in The Sun Also Rises. More recently, Don DeLillo in End Zone analyzes the "pure play" of sport and the contrast between the order, simplicity, and physical immediacy of football and the impersonal, technological character of the society in which the game is played. In Life on the Run, Bill Bradley describes his own experiences in basketball, notably an aging athlete's moments of physical and spiritual exhilaration, a momentary return to youth and the pure joy of sport. Finally, John Updike in Rabbit, Run explores the all-too-familiar adjustment problems confronting an ex-high school basketball star, plus two significant existential issues: the man-in-motion's quest for meaningful experience and the conflict between the demands of self and the demands of society.

At this point, a closer look at themes in two completely different works might be helpful. Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is customarily viewed as a commentary on American society and the futility of the pursuit of the romantic American Dream. Frequently ignored is the role sport plays in this depiction of American experience. With Fitzgerald's own penchant for hero worship and dreams of being a heroic athlete, his close friendship with Lardner, the astounding Black Sox baseball scandal of 1919, and the emergence of the twenties as the "golden age of sport," the fact that three of the novel's major characters--Tom Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Wolfsheim--are associated

with sport seems significant. Buchanan is the all-American football hero who "had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven,"[10] but he has given up a sport of the masses and taken on a sport of the rich--polo. Jordan Baker is also a less-than-ideal athlete. "Incurably dishonest," she was once accused of cheating in a golf tournament. But perhaps the most important sports figure is Wolfsheim, the gambler who wears cuff links made of human molars and fixed the World Series in 1919. Nick Carraway's reaction to this utter disregard for the National Pastime (the American game) is crucial, appearing to emphasize Fitzgerald's view of American society and the decay of the American Dream:

> "Fixed the World's Series," I repeated. The idea staggered me. I remembered, of course, that the World's Series had been fixed in 1919, but if I had thought of it at all I would have thought of as a thing that merely happened, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people--with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe. (p. 74)

In such a world the failure of Gatsby's personal romantic dream seems a foregone conclusion.

Neither Roger Kahn nor his book The Boys of Summer, published in 1972, are in the same category of brilliance as Fitzgerald and The Great Gatsby. Yet this popular book, with its mixture of nostalgia, autobiography, and literary sophistication, contains a moving account of the playing exploits of the '52 and '53 Brooklyn Dodgers and their lives eighteen years later. Kahn notes the obvious issues of race, sport as big business, and the athlete as hero, but he also deals with two far more important themes--fathers and sons and the double-death syndrome of the professional athlete. For Roger Kahn and his father, baseball bridges the generation gap, and the

stages of their relationship are marked by sports activities. After a particularly strenuous game of baseball in a neighborhood park (a type of initiation test) Gordon Kahn finds the appropriate moment to explain to his son the "facts of life." A few years later as the two Kahns root for the Dodgers at Ebbets Field, Roger observes, "We exchanged quick looks and for the first time we were men together."[11] For the sons of professional athletes, however, sport often becomes a barrier in the father-son relationship. Frequently the sons are unable to match their father's or society's expectations of athletic prowess, or an identity is thrust upon them which they are unwilling or unable to accept. The results can often be disastrous.

The Boys of Summer is not only a chronicle of Kahn's maturation but also that of the professional athlete, a process that may not be completed until the athlete's playing days are over. The athlete must confront two deaths; he must perish as an athlete and perish as a man. His reaction to the first is an indication of maturity. For the athlete, growing old is particularly difficult: to admit his diminished physical skills no longer enable him to play the kid's games. He is quickly forgotten by society and frequently unprepared to assume a meaningful role outside the world of sport. But as Kahn emphasizes, those athletes who place sport in a proper perspective, a means to an end rather than an end in itself, succeed as human beings:

> Surely these fine athletes, these boys of summer, have found their measure of ruin. But one does not come away from visits with them, from long nights remembering the past and considering the present, full of sorrow. In the end, quite the other way, one is renewed. Yes, it is fiercely difficult for the athlete to grow old, but to age with dignity and with courage cuts close to what it is to be a man. (p. XX)

This, then, is a hurried survey of a course in sports literature and a rationale for its use. I certainly am not advocating that all college English departments suddenly offer Jock Lit; they will survive without it. But I believe the course is a valid alternative to traditional offerings, whether the material is presented in a whole course or introduced in segments into existing literature, media, and composition courses. As a dominant institution in our society, sport is worthy of study, and sports literature presents a unique and fascinating perspective of life, one that we cannot simply dismiss as sentimental, superficial, and irrelevant. We must understand this view of American experience before we condemn. We must also admit that within this genre is quality writing and intellectual content of a fairly high order. As realistic English teachers we must also utilize the reading habits and interests of a large number of our students to develop their interest in literature in general.

Admittedly, this course may cause some initial problems for students not involved in sports. However, after reading a few of the informative and controversial essays, they frequently want to learn more about sport. These students, particularly those without sports experience, also approach the subject from a critical and skeptical point of view, making them feel important in class discussions and forcing other members of the class to analyze the topic more carefully. Several of these non-interest students find that the reading assignments can lead them into other areas of interest.

Several colleagues have asked why I feel this course is an effective approach to teaching English. My answer is quite simple. A recent textbook advertisement contained the following sales pitch: "These texts excite your students, and when they're excited, you're a more creative teacher." I feel

the same way about sports literature. For the most part, the students and I are excited about the material: when we are excited, not only am I a more creative teacher, but the students are also better readers, thinkers, speakers, and writers. This, it seems to me, is what English teaching is all about.

NOTES

[1] This article is based on a paper delivered at the 1977 NCTE Convention. I am indebted to Professor William J. Palmer of Purdue University for his suggestions on using sports literature.

[2] Melvin Maddocks, "Jock Lit 101," Time, 28 June 1976, pp. 48-49.

[3] Noel Perrin, "Star Wars, Starring Professors," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 17 October 1977, p. 32.

[4] Louis Kampf, "A Course on Spectator Sports," CE, 38 (1977), 835-42.

[5] Robert L. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs, eds., The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); Henry B. Chapin, ed., Sports in Literature (New York: David McKay, 1976).

[6] Wiley Lee Umphlett, The Sporting Myth and the American Experience (New York: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 28.

[7] Quoted in Randall Poe, "The Writing of Sports," Esquire, October 1974, p. 378.

[8] Francine Hardaway, "Foul Play: Sports Metaphors As Public Doublespeak," CE, 38 (1976), 78-82.

[9] Quoted in Poe, p. 378.

[10] F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 6.

[11] Roger Kahn, The Boys of Summer (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 54.